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the muscle hijackers that they would be met by Atta at the airport. Hawsawi also facilitated some of the operation's financing.¹¹³

The muscle hijackers began arriving in the United States in late April 2001. In most cases, they traveled in pairs on tourist visas and entered the United States in Orlando or Miami, Florida; Washington, D.C.; or New York. Those arriving in Florida were assisted by Atta and Shehhi, while Hazmi and Hanjour took care of the rest. By the end of June, 14 of the 15 muscle hijackers had crossed the Atlantic.¹¹⁴

The muscle hijackers supplied an infusion of funds, which they carried as a mixture of cash and traveler's checks purchased in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Seven muscle hijackers are known to have purchased a total of nearly \$50,000 in traveler's checks that were used in the United States. Moreover, substantial deposits into operatives' U.S. bank accounts immediately followed the entry of other muscle hijackers, indicating that those newcomers brought money with them as well. In addition, muscle hijacker Banihammad came to the United States after opening bank accounts in the UAE into which were deposited the equivalent of approximately \$30,000 on June 25, 2001. After his June 27 arrival in the United States, Banihammad made Visa and ATM withdrawals from his UAE accounts.¹¹⁵

The hijackers made extensive use of banks in the United States, choosing both branches of major international banks and smaller regional banks. All of the hijackers opened accounts in their own name, and used passports and other identification documents that appeared valid on their face. Contrary to numerous published reports, there is no evidence the hijackers ever used false Social Security numbers to open any bank accounts. While the hijackers were not experts on the use of the U.S. financial system, nothing they did would have led the banks to suspect criminal behavior, let alone a terrorist plot to commit mass murder.¹¹⁶

The last muscle hijacker to arrive was Khalid al Mihdhar. As mentioned earlier, he had abandoned Hazmi in San Diego in June 2000 and returned to his family in Yemen. Mihdhar reportedly stayed in Yemen for about a month before Khallad persuaded him to return to Afghanistan. Mihdhar complained about life in the United States. He met with KSM, who remained annoyed at his decision to go AWOL. But KSM's desire to drop him from the operation yielded to Bin Ladin's insistence to keep him.¹¹⁷

By late 2000, Mihdhar was in Mecca, staying with a cousin until February 2001, when he went home to visit his family before returning to Afghanistan. In June 2001, Mihdhar returned once more to Mecca to stay with his cousin for another month. Mihdhar said that Bin Ladin was planning five attacks on the United States. Before leaving, Mihdhar asked his cousin to watch over his home and family because of a job he had to do.¹¹⁸

On July 4, 2001, Mihdhar left Saudi Arabia to return to the United States, arriving at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York. Mihdhar gave

THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT



**American Airlines
Flight 11**

Left to right,
Mohamed Atta, pilot;
Waleed al Shehri,
Wail al Shehri,
Satam al Suqami,
Abdulaziz al Omari,
hijackers



**United Airlines
Flight 175**

Left to right,
Marwan al Shehhi,
pilot; *Fayeze Baniham-*
mad, *Ahmed al*
Ghamdi, *Hamza al*
Ghamdi, *Mohand al*
Shehri, hijackers

AL QAEDA AIMS AT THE AMERICAN HOMELAND

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**American Airlines
Flight 77**

Left to right,
Hani Hanjour, pilot;
Nawaf al Hazmi,
Khalid al Mihdhar,
Majed Moqed, *Salem*
al Hazmi, hijackers



**United Airlines
Flight 93**

Left to right,
Ziad Jarrah pilot;
Saeed al Ghamdi,
Ahmad al Haznawi,
Ahmed al Nami,
hijackers



his intended address as the Marriott Hotel, New York City, but instead spent one night at another New York hotel. He then joined the group of hijackers in Paterson, reuniting with Nawaf al Hazmi after more than a year. With two months remaining, all 19 hijackers were in the United States and ready to take the final steps toward carrying out the attacks.¹¹⁹

Assistance from Hezbollah and Iran to al Qaeda

As we mentioned in chapter 2, while in Sudan, senior managers in al Qaeda maintained contacts with Iran and the Iranian-supported worldwide terrorist organization Hezbollah, which is based mainly in southern Lebanon and Beirut. Al Qaeda members received advice and training from Hezbollah.

Intelligence indicates the persistence of contacts between Iranian security officials and senior al Qaeda figures after Bin Ladin's return to Afghanistan. Khallad has said that Iran made a concerted effort to strengthen relations with al Qaeda after the October 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*, but was rebuffed because Bin Ladin did not want to alienate his supporters in Saudi Arabia. Khallad and other detainees have described the willingness of Iranian officials to facilitate the travel of al Qaeda members through Iran, on their way to and from Afghanistan. For example, Iranian border inspectors would be told not to place telltale stamps in the passports of these travelers. Such arrangements were particularly beneficial to Saudi members of al Qaeda.¹²⁰

Our knowledge of the international travels of the al Qaeda operatives selected for the 9/11 operation remains fragmentary. But we now have evidence suggesting that 8 to 10 of the 14 Saudi "muscle" operatives traveled into or out of Iran between October 2000 and February 2001.¹²¹

In October 2000, a senior operative of Hezbollah visited Saudi Arabia to coordinate activities there. He also planned to assist individuals in Saudi Arabia in traveling to Iran during November. A top Hezbollah commander and Saudi Hezbollah contacts were involved.¹²²

Also in October 2000, two future muscle hijackers, Mohand al Shehri and Hamza al Ghamdi, flew from Iran to Kuwait. In November, Ahmed al Ghamdi apparently flew to Beirut, traveling—perhaps by coincidence—on the same flight as a senior Hezbollah operative. Also in November, Salem al Hazmi apparently flew from Saudi Arabia to Beirut.¹²³

In mid-November, we believe, three of the future muscle hijackers, Wail al Shehri, Waleed al Shehri, and Ahmed al Nami, all of whom had obtained their U.S. visas in late October, traveled in a group from Saudi Arabia to Beirut and then onward to Iran. An associate of a senior Hezbollah operative was on the same flight that took the future hijackers to Iran. Hezbollah officials in Beirut and Iran were expecting the arrival of a group during the same time period. The travel of this group was important enough to merit the attention of senior figures in Hezbollah.¹²⁴

Later in November, two future muscle hijackers, Satam al Suqami and Majed

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Moqed, flew into Iran from Bahrain. In February 2001, Khalid al Mihdhar may have taken a flight from Syria to Iran, and then traveled further within Iran to a point near the Afghan border.¹²⁵

KSM and Binalshibh have confirmed that several of the 9/11 hijackers (at least eight, according to Binalshibh) transited Iran on their way to or from Afghanistan, taking advantage of the Iranian practice of not stamping Saudi passports. They deny any other reason for the hijackers' travel to Iran. They also deny any relationship between the hijackers and Hezbollah.¹²⁶

In sum, there is strong evidence that Iran facilitated the transit of al Qaeda members into and out of Afghanistan before 9/11, and that some of these were future 9/11 hijackers. There also is circumstantial evidence that senior Hezbollah operatives were closely tracking the travel of some of these future muscle hijackers into Iran in November 2000. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of a remarkable coincidence—that is, that Hezbollah was actually focusing on some other group of individuals traveling from Saudi Arabia during this same time frame, rather than the future hijackers.¹²⁷

We have found no evidence that Iran or Hezbollah was aware of the planning for what later became the 9/11 attack. At the time of their travel through Iran, the al Qaeda operatives themselves were probably not aware of the specific details of their future operation.

After 9/11, Iran and Hezbollah wished to conceal any past evidence of cooperation with Sunni terrorists associated with al Qaeda. A senior Hezbollah official disclaimed any Hezbollah involvement in 9/11.¹²⁸

We believe this topic requires further investigation by the U.S. government.

7.4 FINAL STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Final Preparations in the United States

During the early summer of 2001, Atta, assisted by Shehhi, was busy coordinating the arrival of most of the muscle hijackers in southern Florida—picking them up at the airport, finding them places to stay, and helping them settle in the United States.¹²⁹

The majority settled in Florida. Some opened bank accounts, acquired mailboxes, and rented cars. Several also joined local gyms, presumably to stay fit for the operation. Upon first arriving, most stayed in hotels and motels; but by mid-June, they settled in shared apartments relatively close to one another and Atta.¹³⁰ Though these muscle hijackers did not travel much after arriving in the United States, two of them, Waleed al Shehri and Satam al Suqami, took unusual trips.

On May 19, Shehri and Suqami flew from Fort Lauderdale to Freeport, the Bahamas, where they had reservations at the Bahamas Princess Resort. The two were turned away by Bahamian officials on arrival, however, because they

lacked visas; they returned to Florida that same day. They likely took this trip to renew Suqami's immigration status, as Suqami's legal stay in the United States ended May 21.¹³¹

On July 30, Shehri traveled alone from Fort Lauderdale to Boston. He flew to San Francisco the next day, where he stayed one night before returning via Las Vegas. While this travel may have been a casing flight—Shehri traveled in first class on the same type of aircraft he would help hijack on September 11 (a Boeing 767) and the trip included a layover in Las Vegas—Shehri was neither a pilot nor a plot leader, as were the other hijackers who took surveillance flights.¹³²

The three Hamburg pilots—Atta, Shehhi, and Jarrah—took the first of their cross-country surveillance flights early in the summer. Shehhi flew from New York to Las Vegas via San Francisco in late May. Jarrah flew from Baltimore to Las Vegas via Los Angeles in early June. Atta flew from Boston to Las Vegas via San Francisco at the end of June. Each traveled in first class, on United Airlines. For the east-west transcontinental leg, each operative flew on the same type of aircraft he would pilot on September 11 (Atta and Shehhi, a Boeing 767; Jarrah, a Boeing 757).¹³³ Hanjour and Hazmi, as noted below, took similar cross-country surveillance flights in August.

Jarrah and Hanjour also received additional training and practice flights in the early summer. A few days before departing on his cross-country test flight, Jarrah flew from Fort Lauderdale to Philadelphia, where he trained at Hortman Aviation and asked to fly the Hudson Corridor, a low-altitude “hallway” along the Hudson River that passes New York landmarks like the World Trade Center. Heavy traffic in the area can make the corridor a dangerous route for an inexperienced pilot. Because Hortman deemed Jarrah unfit to fly solo, he could fly this route only with an instructor.¹³⁴

Hanjour, too, requested to fly the Hudson Corridor about this same time, at Air Fleet Training Systems in Teterboro, New Jersey, where he started receiving ground instruction soon after settling in the area with Hazmi. Hanjour flew the Hudson Corridor, but his instructor declined a second request because of what he considered Hanjour's poor piloting skills. Shortly thereafter, Hanjour switched to Caldwell Flight Academy in Fairfield, New Jersey, where he rented small aircraft on several occasions during June and July. In one such instance on July 20, Hanjour—likely accompanied by Hazmi—rented a plane from Caldwell and took a practice flight from Fairfield to Gaithersburg, Maryland, a route that would have allowed them to fly near Washington, D.C. Other evidence suggests that Hanjour may even have returned to Arizona for flight simulator training earlier in June.¹³⁵

There is no indication that Atta or Shehhi received any additional flight training in June. Both were likely too busy organizing the newly arrived muscle hijackers and taking their cross-country surveillance flights. Atta, moreover, needed to coordinate with his second-in-command, Nawaf al Hazmi.¹³⁶

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Although Atta and Hazmi appear to have been in Virginia at about the same time in early April, they probably did not meet then. Analysis of late April communications associated with KSM indicates that they had wanted to get together in April but could not coordinate the meeting.¹³⁷ Atta and Hazmi probably first met in the United States only when Hazmi traveled round-trip from Newark to Miami between June 19 and June 25.

After he returned to New Jersey, Hazmi's behavior began to closely parallel that of the other hijackers. He and Hanjour, for instance, soon established new bank accounts, acquired a mailbox, rented cars, and started visiting a gym. So did the four other hijackers who evidently were staying with them in New Jersey. Several also obtained new photo identification, first in New Jersey and then at the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, where Hazmi and Hanjour had obtained such documents months earlier, likely with help from their Jordanian friend, Rababah.¹³⁸

Atta probably met again with Hazmi in early July. Returning from his initial cross-country surveillance flight, Atta flew into New York. Rather than return immediately to Florida, he checked into a New Jersey hotel. He picked up tickets to travel to Spain at a travel agency in Paterson on July 4 before departing for Fort Lauderdale. Now that the muscle hijackers had arrived, he was ready to meet with Ramzi Binalshibh for the last time.¹³⁹

The Meeting in Spain

After meeting with Atta in Berlin in January 2001, Binalshibh had spent much of the spring of 2001 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, helping move the muscle hijackers as they passed through Karachi. During the Berlin meeting, the two had agreed to meet later in the year in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the operation in person again. In late May, Binalshibh reported directly to Bin Ladin at an al Qaeda facility known as "Compound Six" near Kandahar.¹⁴⁰

Bin Ladin told Binalshibh to instruct Atta and the others to focus on their security and that of the operation, and to advise Atta to proceed as planned with the targets discussed before Atta left Afghanistan in early 2000—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House, and the Capitol. According to Binalshibh, Bin Ladin said he preferred the White House over the Capitol, asking Binalshibh to confirm that Atta understood this preference. Binalshibh says Bin Ladin had given the same message to Waleed al Shehri for conveyance to Atta earlier that spring. Binalshibh also received permission to meet Atta in Malaysia. Atef provided money for the trip, which KSM would help Binalshibh arrange in Karachi.¹⁴¹

In early June, Binalshibh traveled by taxi from Kandahar to Quetta, Pakistan, where al Qaeda courier Abu Rahmah took him to KSM. According to Binalshibh, KSM provided a plane ticket to Malaysia and a fraudulent Saudi passport to use for the trip. KSM told him to ask Atta to select a date for the attacks. Binalshibh was to return to Germany and then inform KSM of the date. KSM

also gave Binalshibh the email address of Zacarias Moussaoui for future contact. Binalshibh then left for Kuala Lumpur.¹⁴²

Binalshibh contacted Atta upon arriving in Malaysia and found a change in plan. Atta could not travel because he was too busy helping the new arrivals settle in the United States. After remaining in Malaysia for approximately three weeks, Binalshibh went to Bangkok for a few days before returning to Germany. He and Atta agreed to meet later at a location to be determined.¹⁴³

In early July, Atta called Binalshibh to suggest meeting in Madrid, for reasons Binalshibh claims not to know. He says he preferred Berlin, but that he and Atta knew too many people in Germany and feared being spotted together. Unable to buy a ticket to Madrid at the height of the tourist season, Binalshibh booked a seat on a flight to Reus, near Barcelona, the next day. Atta was already en route to Madrid, so Binalshibh phoned Shehhi in the United States to inform him of the change in itinerary.¹⁴⁴

Atta arrived in Madrid on July 8. He spent the night in a hotel and made three calls from his room, most likely to coordinate with Binalshibh. The next day, Atta rented a car and drove to Reus to pick up Binalshibh; the two then drove to the nearby town of Cambrils. Hotel records show Atta renting rooms in the same area until July 19, when he returned his rental car in Madrid and flew back to Fort Lauderdale. On July 16, Binalshibh returned to Hamburg, using a ticket Atta had purchased for him earlier that day. According to Binalshibh, they did not meet with anyone else while in Spain.¹⁴⁵

Binalshibh says he told Atta that Bin Ladin wanted the attacks carried out as soon as possible. Bin Ladin, Binalshibh conveyed, was worried about having so many operatives in the United States. Atta replied that he could not yet provide a date because he was too busy organizing the arriving hijackers and still needed to coordinate the timing of the flights so that the crashes would occur simultaneously. Atta said he required about five to six weeks before he could provide an attack date. Binalshibh advised Atta that Bin Ladin had directed that the other operatives not be informed of the date until the last minute. Atta was to provide Binalshibh with advance notice of at least a week or two so that Binalshibh could travel to Afghanistan and report the date personally to Bin Ladin.¹⁴⁶

As to targets, Atta understood Bin Ladin's interest in striking the White House. Atta said he thought this target too difficult, but had tasked Hazmi and Hanjour to evaluate its feasibility and was awaiting their answer. Atta said that those two operatives had rented small aircraft and flown reconnaissance flights near the Pentagon. Atta explained that Hanjour was assigned to attack the Pentagon, Jarrah the Capitol, and that both Atta and Shehhi would hit the World Trade Center. If any pilot could not reach his intended target, he was to crash the plane. If Atta could not strike the World Trade Center, he planned to crash his aircraft directly into the streets of New York. Atta told Binalshibh that each pilot had volunteered for his assigned target, and that the assignments were subject to change.¹⁴⁷

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During the Spain meeting, Atta also mentioned that he had considered targeting a nuclear facility he had seen during familiarization flights near New York—a target they referred to as “electrical engineering.” According to Binalshibh, the other pilots did not like the idea. They thought a nuclear target would be difficult because the airspace around it was restricted, making reconnaissance flights impossible and increasing the likelihood that any plane would be shot down before impact. Moreover, unlike the approved targets, this alternative had not been discussed with senior al Qaeda leaders and therefore did not have the requisite blessing. Nor would a nuclear facility have particular symbolic value. Atta did not ask Binalshibh to pass this idea on to Bin Ladin, Atef, or KSM, and Binalshibh says he did not mention it to them until after September 11.¹⁴⁸

Binalshibh claims that during their time in Spain, he and Atta also discussed how the hijackings would be executed. Atta said he, Shehhi, and Jarrah had encountered no problems carrying box cutters on cross-country surveillance flights. The best time to storm the cockpit would be about 10–15 minutes after takeoff, when the cockpit doors typically were opened for the first time. Atta did not believe they would need any other weapons. He had no firm contingency plan in case the cockpit door was locked. While he mentioned general ideas such as using a hostage or claiming to have a bomb, he was confident the cockpit doors would be opened and did not consider breaking them down a viable idea. Atta told Binalshibh he wanted to select planes departing on long flights because they would be full of fuel, and that he wanted to hijack Boeing aircraft because he believed them easier to fly than Airbus aircraft, which he understood had an autopilot feature that did not allow them to be crashed into the ground.¹⁴⁹

Finally, Atta confirmed that the muscle hijackers had arrived in the United States without incident. They would be divided into teams according to their English-speaking ability. That way they could assist each other before the operation and each team would be able to command the passengers in English. According to Binalshibh, Atta complained that some of the hijackers wanted to contact their families to say goodbye, something he had forbidden. Atta, moreover, was nervous about his future communications with Binalshibh, whom he instructed to obtain new telephones upon returning to Germany. Before Binalshibh left Spain, he gave Atta eight necklaces and eight bracelets that Atta had asked him to buy when he was recently in Bangkok, believing that if the hijackers were clean shaven and well dressed, others would think them wealthy Saudis and give them less notice.¹⁵⁰

As directed, upon returning from Spain, Binalshibh obtained two new phones, one to communicate with Atta and another to communicate with KSM and others, such as Zacarias Moussaoui. Binalshibh soon contacted KSM and, using code words, reported the results of his meeting with Atta. This important exchange occurred in mid-July.¹⁵¹

The conversation covered various topics. For example, Jarrah was to send Binalshibh certain personal materials from the hijackers, including copies of their

passports, which Binalshibh in turn would pass along to KSM, probably for subsequent use in al Qaeda propaganda.¹⁵²

The most significant part of the mid-July conversation concerned Jarrah's troubled relationship with Atta. KSM and Binalshibh both acknowledge that Jarrah chafed under Atta's authority over him. Binalshibh believes the disagreement arose in part from Jarrah's family visits. Moreover, Jarrah had been on his own for most of his time in the United States because Binalshibh's visa difficulty had prevented the two of them from training together. Jarrah thus felt excluded from the decisionmaking. Binalshibh had to act as a broker between Jarrah and Atta.¹⁵³

Concerned that Jarrah might withdraw from the operation at this late stage, KSM emphasized the importance of Atta and Jarrah's resolving their differences. Binalshibh claims that such concern was unwarranted, and in their mid-July discussion reassured KSM that Atta and Jarrah would reconcile and be ready to move forward in about a month, after Jarrah visited his family. Noting his concern and the potential for delay, KSM at one point instructed Binalshibh to send "the skirts" to "Sally"—a coded instruction to Binalshibh to send funds to Zacarias Moussaoui. While Binalshibh admits KSM did direct him to send Moussaoui money during the mid-July conversation, he denies knowing exactly why he received this instruction—though he thought the money was being provided "within the framework" of the 9/11 operation.¹⁵⁴

KSM may have instructed Binalshibh to send money to Moussaoui in order to help prepare Moussaoui as a potential substitute pilot for Jarrah. On July 20, 2001, Aysel Senguen, Jarrah's girlfriend, purchased a one-way ticket for Jarrah from Miami to Dusseldorf. On Jarrah's previous four trips from the United States to see Senguen and his family in Lebanon, he had always traveled with a round-trip ticket. When Jarrah departed Miami on July 25, Atta appears to have driven him to the airport, another unique circumstance.¹⁵⁵

Binalshibh picked up Jarrah at the airport in Dusseldorf on July 25. Jarrah wanted to see Senguen as soon as possible, so he and Binalshibh arranged to meet a few days later. When they did, they had an emotional conversation during which Binalshibh encouraged Jarrah to see the plan through.¹⁵⁶

While Jarrah was in Germany, Binalshibh and Moussaoui were in contact to arrange for the transfer of funds. Binalshibh received two wire transfers from Hawsawi in the UAE totaling \$15,000 and, within days, relayed almost all of this money to Moussaoui in two installments.¹⁵⁷

Moussaoui had been taking flight lessons at the Airman Flight School in Norman, Oklahoma, since February but stopped in late May. Although at that point he had only about 50 hours of flight time and no solo flights to his credit, Moussaoui began making inquiries about flight materials and simulator training for Boeing 747s. On July 10, he put down a \$1,500 deposit for flight simulator training at Pan Am International Flight Academy in Eagan, Minnesota, and by the end of the month, he had received a simulator schedule to train from

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August 13 through August 20. Moussaoui also purchased two knives and inquired of two manufacturers of GPS equipment whether their products could be converted for aeronautical use—activities that closely resembled those of the 9/11 hijackers during their final preparations for the attacks.¹⁵⁸

On August 10, shortly after getting the money from Binalshibh, Moussaoui left Oklahoma with a friend and drove to Minnesota. Three days later, Moussaoui paid the \$6,800 balance owed for his flight simulator training at Pan Am in cash and began his training. His conduct, however, raised the suspicions of his flight instructor. It was unusual for a student with so little training to be learning to fly large jets without any intention of obtaining a pilot's license or other goal. On August 16, once the instructor reported his suspicion to the authorities, Moussaoui was arrested by the INS on immigration charges.¹⁵⁹

KSM denies ever considering Moussaoui for the planes operation. Instead he claims that Moussaoui was slated to participate in a "second wave" of attacks. KSM also states that Moussaoui had no contact with Atta, and we are unaware of evidence contradicting this assertion.¹⁶⁰

Yet KSM has also stated that by the summer of 2001, he was too busy with the planes operation to continue planning for any second-wave attacks. Moreover, he admits that only three potential pilots were ever recruited for the alleged second wave, Moussaoui plus two others who, by midsummer of 2001, had backed out of the plot.¹⁶¹ We therefore believe that the effort to push Moussaoui forward in August 2001 lends credence to the suspicion that he was being primed as a possible pilot in the immediate planes operation.

Binalshibh says he assumed Moussaoui was to take his place as another pilot in the 9/11 operation. Recounting a post-9/11 discussion with KSM in Kandahar, Binalshibh claims KSM mentioned Moussaoui as being part of the 9/11 operation. Although KSM never referred to Moussaoui by name, Binalshibh understood he was speaking of the operative to whom Binalshibh had wired money. Binalshibh says KSM did not approve of Moussaoui but believes KSM did not remove him from the operation only because Moussaoui had been selected and assigned by Bin Ladin himself.¹⁶²

KSM did not hear about Moussaoui's arrest until after September 11. According to Binalshibh, had Bin Ladin and KSM learned prior to 9/11 that Moussaoui had been detained, they might have canceled the operation. When Binalshibh discussed Moussaoui's arrest with KSM after September 11, KSM congratulated himself on not having Moussaoui contact the other operatives, which would have compromised the operation. Moussaoui had been in contact with Binalshibh, of course, but this was not discovered until after 9/11.¹⁶³

As it turned out, Moussaoui was not needed to replace Jarrah. By the time Moussaoui was arrested in mid-August, Jarrah had returned to the United States from his final trip to Germany, his disagreement with Atta apparently resolved. The operatives began their final preparations for the attacks.¹⁶⁴

Readying the Attacks

A week after he returned from meeting Binalshibh in Spain, Atta traveled to Newark, probably to coordinate with Hazmi and give him additional funds. Atta spent a few days in the area before returning to Florida on July 30. The month of August was busy, as revealed by a set of contemporaneous Atta-Binalshibh communications that were recovered after September 11.¹⁶⁵

On August 3, for example, Atta and Binalshibh discussed several matters, such as the best way for the operatives to purchase plane tickets and the assignment of muscle hijackers to individual teams. Atta and Binalshibh also revisited the question of whether to target the White House. They discussed targets in coded language, pretending to be students discussing various fields of study: "architecture" referred to the World Trade Center, "arts" the Pentagon, "law" the Capitol, and "politics" the White House.¹⁶⁶

Binalshibh reminded Atta that Bin Ladin wanted to target the White House. Atta again cautioned that this would be difficult. When Binalshibh persisted, Atta agreed to include the White House but suggested they keep the Capitol as an alternate target in case the White House proved too difficult. Atta also suggested that the attacks would not happen until after the first week in September, when Congress reconvened.¹⁶⁷

Atta and Binalshibh also discussed "the friend who is coming as a tourist"—a cryptic reference to candidate hijacker Mohamed al Kahtani (mentioned above), whom Hawsawi was sending the next day as "the last one" to "complete the group." On August 4, Atta drove to the Orlando airport to meet Kahtani. Upon arrival, however, Kahtani was denied entry by immigration officials because he had a one-way ticket and little money, could not speak English, and could not adequately explain what he intended to do in the United States. He was sent back to Dubai. Hawsawi contacted KSM, who told him to help Kahtani return to Pakistan.¹⁶⁸

On August 7, Atta flew from Fort Lauderdale to Newark, probably to coordinate with Hazmi. Two days later, Ahmed al Ghamdi and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who had been living in New Jersey with Hazmi and Hanjour, flew to Miami—probably signifying that the four hijacking teams had finally been assigned. While Atta was in New Jersey, he, Hazmi, and Hanjour all purchased tickets for another set of surveillance flights. Like Shehhi, Jarrah, Atta, and Waleed al Shehri before them, Hazmi and Hanjour each flew in first class on the same type of aircraft they would hijack on 9/11 (a Boeing 757), and on transcontinental flights that connected to Las Vegas. This time, however, Atta himself also flew directly to Las Vegas, where all three stayed on August 13–14. Beyond Las Vegas's reputation for welcoming tourists, we have seen no credible evidence explaining why, on this occasion and others, the operatives flew to or met in Las Vegas.¹⁶⁹

Through August, the hijackers kept busy with their gym training and the pilots took frequent practice flights on small rented aircraft. The operatives also

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began to make purchases suggesting that the planning was coming to an end. In mid-August, for example, they bought small knives that may actually have been used in the attacks. On August 22, moreover, Jarrah attempted to purchase four GPS units from a pilot shop in Miami. He was able to buy only one unit, which he picked up a few days later when he also purchased three aeronautical charts.¹⁷⁰

Perhaps most significant, however, was the purchase of plane tickets for September 11. On August 23, Atta again flew to Newark, probably to meet with Hazmi and select flights. All 19 tickets were booked and purchased between August 25 and September 5.¹⁷¹

It therefore appears that the attack date was selected by the third week of August. This timing is confirmed by Binalshibh, who claims Atta called him with the date in mid-August. According to Binalshibh, Atta used a riddle to convey the date in code—a message of two branches, a slash, and a lollipop (to non-Americans, 11/9 would be interpreted as September 11). Binalshibh says he called Atta back to confirm the date before passing it to KSM.¹⁷²

KSM apparently received the date from Binalshibh in a message sent through Binalshibh's old Hamburg associate, Zakariya Essabar. Both Binalshibh and KSM claim that Essabar was not privy to the meaning of the message and had no foreknowledge of the attacks. According to Binalshibh, shortly after the date was chosen, he advised Essabar and another Hamburg associate, Said Bahaji, that if they wanted to go to Afghanistan, now was the time because it would soon become more difficult. Essabar made reservations on August 22 and departed Hamburg for Karachi on August 30; Bahaji purchased his tickets on August 20 and departed Hamburg for Karachi on September 3.¹⁷³

Binalshibh also made arrangements to leave for Pakistan during early September, before the attacks, as did Ali and Hawsawi, the plot facilitators in the UAE. During these final days, Binalshibh and Atta kept in contact by phone, email, and instant messaging. Although Atta had forbidden the hijackers to contact their families, he apparently placed one last call to his own father on September 9. Atta also asked Binalshibh to contact the family of one hijacker, pass along goodbyes from others, and give regards to KSM. Jarrah alone appears to have left a written farewell—a sentimental letter to Aysel Senguen.¹⁷⁴

Hazmi, however, may not have been so discreet. He may have telephoned his former San Diego companion, Mohdar Abdullah, in late August. Several bits of evidence indicate that others in Abdullah's circle may have received word that something big would soon happen. As noted earlier, Abdullah's behavior reportedly changed noticeably. Prior to September 11, both he and Yazeed al Salmi suddenly became intent on proceeding with their planned marriages. One witness quotes Salmi as commenting after the 9/11 attacks, "I knew they were going to do something, that is why I got married." Moreover, as of August 2001, Iyad Kreiwesh and other employees at the Texaco station where Hazmi had worked suddenly were anticipating attention from law enforcement

authorities in the near future. Finally, according to an uncorroborated witness account, early on the morning of September 10, Abdullah, Osama Awadallah, Omar Bakarbashat, and others behaved suspiciously at the gas station. According to the witness, after the group met, Awadallah said "it is finally going to happen" as the others celebrated by giving each other high fives.¹⁷⁵

Dissent within the al Qaeda Leadership

While tactical preparations for the attack were nearing completion, the entire operation was being questioned at the top, as al Qaeda and the Taliban argued over strategy for 2001. Our focus has naturally been on the specifics of the planes operation. But from the perspective of Bin Ladin and Atef, this operation was only one, admittedly key, element of their unfolding plans for the year. Living in Afghanistan, interacting constantly with the Taliban, the al Qaeda leaders would never lose sight of the situation in that country.

Bin Ladin's consistent priority was to launch a major attack directly against the United States. He wanted the planes operation to proceed as soon as possible. Mihdhar reportedly told his cousin during the summer of 2001 that Bin Ladin was reputed to have remarked, "I will make it happen even if I do it by myself."¹⁷⁶

According to KSM, Bin Ladin had been urging him to advance the date of the attacks. In 2000, for instance, KSM remembers Bin Ladin pushing him to launch the attacks amid the controversy after then-Israeli opposition party leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. KSM claims Bin Ladin told him it would be enough for the hijackers simply to down planes rather than crash them into specific targets. KSM says he resisted the pressure.¹⁷⁷

KSM claims to have faced similar pressure twice more in 2001. According to him, Bin Ladin wanted the operation carried out on May 12, 2001, seven months to the day after the *Cole* bombing. KSM adds that the 9/11 attacks had originally been envisioned for May 2001. The second time he was urged to launch the attacks early was in June or July 2001, supposedly after Bin Ladin learned from the media that Sharon would be visiting the White House. On both occasions KSM resisted, asserting that the hijacking teams were not ready. Bin Ladin pressed particularly strongly for the latter date in two letters stressing the need to attack early. The second letter reportedly was delivered by Bin Ladin's son-in-law, Aws al Madani.¹⁷⁸

Other evidence corroborates KSM's account. For instance, Mihdhar told his cousin that the attacks were to happen in May, but were postponed twice, first to July, then to September. Moreover, one candidate hijacker remembers a general warning being issued in the al Qaeda camps in July or early August, just like the warnings issued two weeks before the *Cole* bombing and ten days before the eventual 9/11 attacks. During the midsummer alert, al Qaeda members dispersed with their families, security was increased, and Bin Ladin disappeared for about 30 days, until the alert was canceled.¹⁷⁹

While the details of the operation were strictly compartmented, by the time

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of the alert, word had begun to spread that an attack against the United States was coming. KSM notes that it was generally well known by the summer of 2001 that he was planning some kind of operation against the United States. Many were even aware that he had been preparing operatives to go to the United States, leading some to conclude that al Qaeda was planning a near-term attack on U.S. soil. Moreover, Bin Ladin had made several remarks that summer hinting at an upcoming attack and generating rumors throughout the worldwide jihadist community. Bin Ladin routinely told important visitors to expect significant attacks against U.S. interests soon and, during a speech at the al Faruq camp, exhorted trainees to pray for the success of an attack involving 20 martyrs. Others have confirmed hearing indications of an impending attack and have verified that such news, albeit without specific details, had spread across al Qaeda.¹⁸⁰

Although Bin Ladin's top priority apparently was to attack the United States, others had a different view. The Taliban leaders put their main emphasis on the year's military offensive against the Northern Alliance, an offensive that ordinarily would begin in the late spring or summer. They certainly hoped that this year's offensive would finally finish off their old enemies, driving them from Afghanistan. From the Taliban's perspective, an attack against the United States might be counterproductive. It might draw the Americans into the war against them, just when final victory seemed within their grasp.¹⁸¹

There is evidence that Mullah Omar initially opposed a major al Qaeda operation directly against the United States in 2001. Furthermore, by July, with word spreading of a coming attack, a schism emerged among the senior leadership of al Qaeda. Several senior members reportedly agreed with Mullah Omar. Those who reportedly sided with Bin Ladin included Atef, Sulayman Abu Ghayth, and KSM. But those said to have opposed him were weighty figures in the organization—including Abu Hafs the Mauritanian, Sheikh Saeed al Masri, and Sayf al Adl. One senior al Qaeda operative claims to recall Bin Ladin arguing that attacks against the United States needed to be carried out immediately to support insurgency in the Israeli-occupied territories and protest the presence of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia. Beyond these rhetorical appeals, Bin Ladin also reportedly thought an attack against the United States would benefit al Qaeda by attracting more suicide operatives, eliciting greater donations, and increasing the number of sympathizers willing to provide logistical assistance.¹⁸²

Mullah Omar is reported to have opposed this course of action for ideological reasons rather than out of fear of U.S. retaliation. He is said to have preferred for al Qaeda to attack Jews, not necessarily the United States. KSM contends that Omar faced pressure from the Pakistani government to keep al Qaeda from engaging in operations outside Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's chief financial manager, Sheikh Saeed, argued that al Qaeda should defer to the Taliban's wishes. Another source says that Sheikh Saeed opposed the operation, both out of deference to Omar and because he feared the U.S. response to an

attack. Abu Hafs the Mauritanian reportedly even wrote Bin Ladin a message basing opposition to the attacks on the Qur'an.¹⁸³

According to KSM, in late August, when the operation was fully planned, Bin Ladin formally notified the al Qaeda Shura Council that a major attack against the United States would take place in the coming weeks. When some council members objected, Bin Ladin countered that Mullah Omar lacked authority to prevent al Qaeda from conducting jihad outside Afghanistan. Though most of the Shura Council reportedly disagreed, Bin Ladin persisted. The attacks went forward.¹⁸⁴

The story of dissension within al Qaeda regarding the 9/11 attacks is probably incomplete. The information on which the account is based comes from sources who were not privy to the full scope of al Qaeda and Taliban planning. Bin Ladin and Atef, however, probably would have known, at least, that

- The general Taliban offensive against the Northern Alliance would rely on al Qaeda military support.
- Another significant al Qaeda operation was making progress during the summer—a plot to assassinate the Northern Alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud. The operatives, disguised as journalists, were in Massoud's camp and prepared to kill him sometime in August. Their appointment to see him was delayed.¹⁸⁵

But on September 9, the Massoud assassination took place. The delayed Taliban offensive against the Northern Alliance was apparently coordinated to begin as soon as he was killed, and it got under way on September 10.¹⁸⁶

As they deliberated earlier in the year, Bin Ladin and Atef would likely have remembered that Mullah Omar was dependent on them for the Massoud assassination and for vital support in the Taliban military operations. KSM remembers Atef telling him that al Qaeda had an agreement with the Taliban to eliminate Massoud, after which the Taliban would begin an offensive to take over Afghanistan. Atef hoped Massoud's death would also appease the Taliban when the 9/11 attacks happened. There are also some scant indications that Omar may have been reconciled to the 9/11 attacks by the time they occurred.¹⁸⁷

Moving to Departure Positions

In the days just before 9/11, the hijackers returned leftover funds to al Qaeda and assembled in their departure cities. They sent the excess funds by wire transfer to Hawsawi in the UAE, about \$26,000 altogether.¹⁸⁸

The hijackers targeting American Airlines Flight 77, to depart from Dulles, migrated from New Jersey to Laurel, Maryland, about 20 miles from Washington, D.C. They stayed in a motel during the first week in September and spent

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time working out at a gym. On the final night before the attacks, they lodged at a hotel in Herndon, Virginia, close to the airport.¹⁸⁹

Further north, the hijackers targeting United Airlines Flight 93, to depart from Newark, gathered in that city from their base in Florida on September 7. Just after midnight on September 8–9, Jarrah received a speeding ticket in Maryland as he headed north on I-95. He joined the rest of his team at their hotel.¹⁹⁰

Atta was still busy coordinating the teams. On September 7, he flew from Fort Lauderdale to Baltimore, presumably to meet with the Flight 77 team in Laurel. On September 9, he flew from Baltimore to Boston. By then, Shehhi had arrived there, and Atta was seen with him at his hotel. The next day, Atta picked up Omari at another hotel, and the two drove to Portland, Maine, for reasons that remain unknown. In the early morning hours of September 11, they boarded a commuter flight to Boston to connect to American Airlines Flight 11. The two spent their last night pursuing ordinary activities: making ATM withdrawals, eating pizza, and shopping at a convenience store. Their three fellow hijackers for Flight 11 stayed together in a hotel in Newton, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston.¹⁹¹

Shehhi and his team targeting United Airlines Flight 175 from Logan Airport spent their last hours at two Boston hotels.¹⁹² The plan that started with a proposal by KSM in 1996 had evolved to overcome numerous obstacles. Now 19 men waited in nondescript hotel rooms to board four flights the next morning.